

# Native and non-native sign language users: a contribution to the language acquisition debate

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## Abstract

Non native speakers of oral languages tend to present an accent when they acquire L2 (Scales, J., Wennerstrom, A., Richard, D., & Wu, S. (2006). Regarding pronunciation in L2 it is known that non-native speakers acquire segmental and prosodic patterns in another language in a way which is not the same as a native speaker (Bongaerts, T., van Summeren, C., Planken, B., & Schils, E. (1997). Native speakers of a given language are thus able to identify a foreigner speaker just by the way the L2 is pronounced (Fledge, 1992; Major, 2007). Thus, a native speaker, without any specific training, has the ability to identify a non-native speaker by s/he oral performance. A relevant question to be posed is whether sign language users are able to identify a non-native sign language user. This paper aims to be a contribution towards this issue by discussing results from users of LIBRAS (Brazilian Sign Language). The research was done with 28 LIBRAS users, including males and females, being that the vast majority was profound deaf (79%). All participants attended school at least for the elementary school and had wide social relations with deaf and non-deaf people. Participants were asked to answer a written questionnaire which posited questions as whether or not they were able to identify a LIBRAS user as deaf or not. The answers indicated that 85,6% of participants were able to identify, in a communicative situation, if the other person was deaf or not. They also reported that the identification was done by the way the other person articulated the signs when using

LIBRAS. We suggest that this indicates that the ability to identify a LIBRAS user as native or not follows from language acquisition. LIBRAS users acquired it natively and thus were able to construct grammatical principles for the language. On the other hand, L2 LIBRAS speakers, although proficient in L2, did not have the ability of native speakers. Theoretical issues from this claim are discussed in the light of complex systems (Larsen-Freeman, 2011). We thus address some future research questions, which could address strategies adopted by the sign language user to identify the other speaker as native or not.

## References

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